

Some Experiences of Lord Syfret.

BY ARABELLA KENEALY.

THE VILLA OF SIMPKINS.

ILLUSTRATED BY R. SAVAGE.



HERE is an atmosphere about houses. They who live and joy and grieve in them invest them with a kind of aura. So some houses come to wear a face of gloom, of gaiety, of tragedy or terror. This circumstance, to me so manifest, escapes the notice of most persons.

One can see that tiles are broken on the roof; another that the window curtains are in need of washing; another that the masonry demands re-pointing or the woodwork re-painting; while a fourth condemns the sanitary arrangements. But the more intrinsic fact, the fact of desolation or disaster, that to my mind is most obvious, they miss; and even when perceived they refer to some detail of dilapidation or poverty. That my instinct is infallible I do not claim. On the contrary, it has more than once deceived me; but in cases where it has been rooted and tenacious, even though proofs have not substantiated it, I am satisfied my conviction of mystery or calamity has had its origin in fact; that the sense I have of violence and murder in the midst of a smiling family is an echo, a shadow, a stain on the fabric of life left by some former catastrophe. Sometimes I have been able to justify it by raking up the ashes of the past. Sometimes—and this is singular—the tragedy has happened long after I have sensed it. Of this what follows is an example.

Sauntering one day down a road in a suburban town, whither I had gone in search of adventure, I came upon a house a-building. It was a villa residence much after the style of other villa residences in the neighbourhood, a sixteen or eighteen-roomed house divided from

its fellows by an acre of geometrically laid-out garden wherein it stood with a pretentious and pharisaical air of being some Englishman's castle. The structure was completed, and men were painting the wood-work, gravelling the walks and putting in the other finishing touches which would for a year or two make its ostentatious freshness a reproach to its less lately smartened neighbours. There was nothing to stir one's interest. It was only another of the housings of opulent vulgarity with which the place abounded—housings that smacked of the shop and suggested sleek over-fed occupants, in whom wine and good living had produced a kind of mental adiposity to act as buffer between their natures and the higher issues of life, as the flesh of physical plethora obliterated the lines divine of their persons. I passed on unconcerned. At the further entrance to the drive a man was standing, overlooking the hinging of a gate. I took him to be owner or builder.

The man's face struck me. I stopped short. He glanced up, scowling as though he would have despatched me about my business. Now I was interested. I had seldom seen a face of so much malignity. It struck me that I would not care to occupy a house planned by a fellow so evil. A shock of rough red hair and beard overgrew his face. His nose, slightly awry, was long and flattened at the nostrils with both cruelty and sensuality. His lips were thick and protrusive. The hand and wrist extended, directing the men, were shaggy with a coarse red thatch. One eye had a sinister droop. No: I should not care to tenant a house of his building.

"Do you want anything?" he demanded roughly after a minute. He was well-dressed and apparently a person of some standing.

I returned his savage glance with a cool stare

"I want nothing," I said curtly.

He had more than a mind to inquire why then (with qualifications) I filled up the path. But he thought better of it. There is no law to prohibit a man from staring, and my manner proclaimed my determination to stare just so long as it pleased me.

"Hang you, you'll scrape the paint!" he shouted, as one of the workmen stumbled and jammed against the post the gate he was lifting.

The man grumbled something to the effect that the job was too much for two.

"Then go and be hanged to you," the builder rasped.

"Get your wage in the office and march!"

The man mumbled sullenly again, "I'm sick o' being swore at from mornin' to night."

"Easy mate," his comrade counselled. "Now then, stretch yer limbs and in she goes."

With an effort they hoisted the gate and lowered it, dropping the bolts into the sockets with a rush.

"Hang you!" the builder shouted again; "it wasn't your fault you didn't snap the hinges."

The labourers, panting, mopped their faces.

"You have a limited glossary, my friend," I interposed, addressing the red-haired bully. "Take the advice of an older man, and curb your tongue. That 'hang' of yours is not calculated to bring the best work out of men."

He swung his evil eye upon me like a lamp. Only the self-control of habit prevented him from striking me. All at once his manner changed. He scanned me closely; then he raised his hat.

"Pardon, my lord," he said, obsequiously. "I did not recognise you. Your lordship does not know me, perhaps. I have the honour to be your new agent at Rossmore."

"The deuce you have!" I answered. "From your credentials I should have supposed you a different man."

I resolved on the spot that never again, no matter how excellent his testimonials, would I engage a man without an interview.

"Your lordship misjudges me," he submitted plausibly. "I confess to being in bad humour. If you had much to do

with this class you would find there is but one way of dealing with it."

"It will not do at Rossmore," I said sharply. "My people are not used to the treatment of dogs."

"In dealing with your lordship's concerns I shall follow your lordship's wishes," he responded, adding, with a spasm of independence: "Here I am attending to my own affairs."

I liked him the better for his independence. I laughed and nodded him good-morning.

"Your temper is not pretty," I said, as I walked off. "Indeed, I was thinking I should not care to occupy a house built by a person so profane as yourself."

He made two steps after me. His face paled in its circle of red hair.

"Do you mean anything?" he submitted, hoarsely. There was an uneasy glitter in his eyes.

"Pooh!" I said. "I shall not cancel our agreement for a few 'hangs.'"

His eyes still probed my face. My words had plainly relieved him. Yet I had a curious sense of something underlying all that appeared.

"When your six months are up, my friend," I soliloquised. "I shall exchange you for a steward of more prepossessing looks."

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A month later I strolled down the same road. I stopped short at the gates of Simpkins' house—the gates which had had so sulphurous a baptism. On one was painted the name Edenhome. It struck my sense of humour. Was it of Simpkins's giving? Lurked there beneath that red thatch of his a corner for sentiment? I decided otherwise. Simpkins and sentiment were not compatible. The name was merely a lure for letting purposes.

I ran my eye over the house's face. Was it the place? Surely not. This was no house of only some months standing. I walked up the road and came back to it. This was the place, assuredly. I stood staring at it. What in the name of amazement had come to it? Where was the freshness that was to put its neighbours to the blush? The place had an air of ruin, of a house un-repaired for half a century. It were as though a blight had fallen on it. The paint of the gates had dulled into a dirty drab, the hinge-end was discoloured by

a rust-stain, which, like a blood-stain, had trickled from the iron sockets. Someone had made it his business to scratch out the initial letter, so that the name stood on one gate "Denhome." The abridgement seemed to scowl. I opened the gate and went in. The same blight that had fallen on the house had fallen on the garden. The greater number of the shrubs had shrivelled and

tion. There was nothing to explain the impression I had had of ruin.

I started; for of a sudden at an upper window, from among a daintiness of pink blind, a sinister face showed out. It was gone as soon as seen. But I knew the evil eye; I knew the Iscariot hair and beard; I knew the malign glance. Irritation succeeded. What business had Simpkins here? His duty



"DO YOU WANT ANYTHING?"

died. The walks were set with brown ghosts. The grass of the lawn had fallen in patches, giving an uncanny piebald look. As I approached I perceived that blinds had been put to the windows—fresh gay-looking blinds of a pink pattern. They only served to accentuate the gloom. Apparently the house was about to be occupied. I wondered how anybody could have been induced to take it. Coming closer, I found I had been betrayed into a singular error, for the paint was fresh and unpeeled, the structure in excellent condi-

tion. I was with my affairs a hundred miles away. I strode up the steps. The door stood ajar—I entered. Inside the house was as sombre as outside. Gloom and ill-omen possessed it like black-browed tenants. I mounted the stairs, my footsteps echoing hollowly and fleeing before me noisy and afraid, like sound running amuck in the empty upper spaces. Suddenly they seemed to turn, and came hustling back upon me—leaping, stumbling down the stairs as if in panic. A rumbling echo roared like distant thunder. For a moment I thought the

house was about my ears—its premature decay had culminated in the falling of the roof. Then there was silence, the echoes slipping into quietude.

I went straight on, making for the room in which I had seen him. My temper was up. I determined to give Mr. Simpkins a piece of my mind. At the top of the stairs I halted. Not a sound stirred. The landing was broad and well-lighted. Into it four doors opened. The construction was different from that I had expected. There was a broad blank passage wall where I had supposed the door of the front room—the principal bed-room—would be. It was a construction as singular as it was unsightly. It had been so obvious to place the door of that centre room in the centre of this wall.

Suddenly I felt faint. The passage was pervaded by a curious heavy odour, arising, I imagined, from the paint. My head throbbed.

I made for one of the rooms facing me. The air here was fresh. I threw up a window and leaned out. When I was quite myself I looked about the room. I was astonished to find it small. Holding my handkerchief to my nostrils I went down the passage and opened the other door, the only other door in the front wall. Another little room! And no Simpkins! Where could the fellow be? And where was the door of that room in which I had seen him?—a room which must take up at least half the house front. I went all over the house. Not a sign of him; yet he could not have escaped without me seeing him. And why should he? My head throbbed heavily from the curious fumes. It did not smell like paint. Nor was its effect like paint. Probably an escape of gas.

I threw up another window. Doing so I looked out. I was in the second small front room. To the left of me was the big bay-window at which I had seen Simpkins. I went to the end of the corridor. From the window of the other room the bay showed to my right. I felt maddened. Where was the entrance to that room—where, doubtless, Simpkins still remained? Pacing the passage I heard a sound as though something dropped. I knocked angrily upon the wall.

"Simpkins," I shouted, "what is the meaning of this fool's play? Where and why are you hiding?"

The words came back to me like gibes out of the hollows of the house. I shouted again only to be answered in the same strain. I went downstairs, and out into the garden. I ran my eye over the house front. It was as though I were being mocked. For not only were the windows I had opened still thrown up, but the three sashes of the bay, which before had been closed, were now raised. Out there in the daylight I could not help suspecting myself of some stupidity. There must be a door leading from one of the smaller side-rooms to that centre room—a door I had missed. Yet I had carefully looked for such a door. Bah! my senses must have been fogged by that vapour. My head even now throbbed with it. A room without entrance was an absurdity!

I went back to the house. The door was shut fast. I rattled it. I threw my weight against it. It was fast locked. Yet I had left it ajar. Was I being fooled, or was I fooling myself? Had I indeed seen Simpkins? Was anything as it had seemed to me that morning? I strode to the nearest telegraph office and wired him at Rossmore. In an hour a reply came: "Am here, at your lordship's service.—SIMPKINS." I took a course of Turkish baths and drank no wine for a week. If there be one thing I despise it is a man who cannot keep his head clear.

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The villa of Simpkins faded from my mind, as did likewise, to some extent, my first impression of its builder. To say I ever liked him would mis-state the truth. But I could not help recognizing his exceptional business gifts and the zeal wherewith he prosecuted my affairs. I began to re-consider my intention of parting with him.

One morning I received the following letter from a girl dismissed a year before from my employ for bungling some business whereon she had been set:—

"HONoured LORD,—Pardon my addressing you, for I know you think low of me since the Smithson case; but any girl would have been frightened when Smithson took the carving-knife to her. But even Smithson's, honoured lord, was not as bad as this place. Yet mistress and master is bride and bridegroom, and a nicer couple couldn't be. 'What is it?'

you'd ask. It's the house, honoured lord. Yet it's a nice house, and the kitchen and pantries everything you could want for. But there's something about it. What that is time, if I ever have the nerve to stop long enough, will show. It's called 'Denhome' on the gate"—here I pricked up my ears—"but young mistress calls it 'Edenhome,' which we lay to soft-heartedness.

Honoured lord, the Lovells are not gentry; which, when I found out, I never thought I could stop. But Mrs. Lovell's an angel, and there's no stint, them having come into a fortune. I don't rightly know the facts, but as they taught us at the Institute not to leave out anything, I mention that the Lovells got their money curious. Someone else had it, an uncle of theirs—Mr. Sinkin his name is—"

"My dear young woman," I here interjected, "you are disregarding one of my most stringent rules—that of getting names correctly."

"Well, he'd had the money—two thousand a year it is—for nearly ten years, when it was proved it wasn't his, but Lovell's. He'd kept back a will or something, they say; but it couldn't be proved. So he had to turn out. He must be a kind man, because he's built them this house, and won't take any rent for it. He says it eases his conscience. And, of course, he can't help there being something horrible about the house. It's a nice view, and polished floors, but the strangest noises and feel about it. Mr. Sinkin comes sometimes. He isn't a nice-looking gentleman, being cross-eyed and carrotty, but he's wonder-

ful kind and keeps telling master to look after his health, being delicate; and as Sinkin would get the money if master was to die, I call it kind. He's that careful of them nobody would expect—considering. The first time he came he was quite taken up because they didn't sleep in the best bed-room. 'It's a south aspic,' he said, quite angry, 'and a big atmosphery room. It was built special



"A PRETTY FRAGILE LITTLE CREATURE"

for you.' He quite stamped up and down the carpet, and mistress put her pretty white hand on his shoulder—though she's afraid of him—and she says, 'Uncle, we keep it for visitors. We keep it for you when you come. You've been so good to us.' He stared and looked quite queer. He was terribly vexed they didn't use the room he made for them.

"'O, you keep it for me, do you,' he says. Then he burst out laughing. He

laughs rather hoarse, and young mistress, she got nearer to master and put her hand to her throat. I was setting the table for dinner and I wasn't hurrying. Mr. Sinkin isn't good-looking, but he's nice spoken, and though I only hung his great coat up for him he gave me five shillings and says, 'you look after my nephew and niece. I'm fond of 'em.'

"It came up again at dinner. I had just handed him his pudding—mistress made it with her own hands—when he says again, shaking his fist playful at her, 'and don't let me hear any more of your not sleeping in the front bed-room—the room I built special, so sunny and healthy for poor Ned. Ned's lungs want a south aspic.' Master laughs and says, 'Why, uncle, all the front rooms are south.' Sinkin looked vexed. And I thought myself it was all they could do to please him and not argue. He says, frowning, 'It's the atmospheriness you want, Ned,' and he turned to mistress and says something about cuba feet, and ends, 'so I look to you to see Ned sleeps there. His mother died consumptive.' Mistress turned pale and caught the master's hand. 'O, Ned dear,' she says. 'I've no cough,' he answers, 'it's only uncle's over-kindness.'

"Ought he to go abroad?' she says to Sinkin, almost sobbing.

"He's best where he is,' he says short. 'The drains abroad are shocking.'

"Uncle,' she says, shivering, there's noises in the room—the strangest noises. Could it be rats?'

"He looked hard at her and says slowly: 'Rats in a new house—and a well-built house like this. Nonsense.' After a minute: 'There aren't noises every night?' he asks.

"No,' she says, 'only sometimes—horrid rumbling noises, and I think the gas escapes. That's why I thought it must be rats. They say rats eat the pipes.'

"I don't wonder he looked cross. It wasn't like mistress to argue so. Master broke out laughing. 'Uncle will think we're very ungrateful, Milly,' he says. 'And you can't be so silly as to think rats eat gas pipes.'

"Will you sleep there to-night, uncle,' she says. 'I should feel comfortable if somebody had slept there.'

"He finished picking out a walnut. Then, 'There's nothing I'd like better,'

he says. But after all he fell asleep in the library. I found him there when I went to do it next morning. His boots and coat was off, and he was on the couch covered with rugs almost as if he'd meant to sleep there. He gave me half-a-crown. 'You needn't say anything,' he says, 'but I was that tired I dropt asleep.' And he took his coat and boots and slipped up to the spare room. Honoured lord, it wasn't a week after when a young gent stopping here went to bed in the spare room—mistress couldn't bring herself to sleep there—as cheerful as might be, and in the morning he was dead—poisoned, the doctor said, with prussic acid. There he was, stretched out with his eyes staring horrible and his face blue, and the room like an essence-of-almonds bottle. Mr. Sinkin came down in an awful state. He got the papers to leave out the name of the house and paid us servants to keep it quiet.

"And, for Heaven's sake, don't leave the house,' he says to master, 'or I shall never let it again!'

"Master promised faithful. He had to settle it after with mistress. She begged him to take her away. She'd heard the noises that very night. 'I've promised uncle,' he says. So you see, honoured lord, I'm right in calling it an awful house. You don't know what a feel there is about it."

I wrote her one question. She replied, "The middle front room door opens in the passage just opposite the stairs. There's a little room at each end of the passage."

"Simpkins," I said, "I shall be in Suburbia this week. Can I leave a message for you at Edenhome?"

He finished the few lines of a letter he was writing. Then he looked up. What eyes he had!

"Pardon," he said, "I am anxious to catch this post. Now I am at your lordship's service."

"Well, you heard what I said."

He scanned me narrowly.

"My lord," he returned, "I fancied I could not have heard aright."

"Imagine you did."

"I have let Edenhome," he said, evasively.

"To a nephew, I know. Can I leave a message for you?"

"Your lordship is pleased to jest. My nephew is not likely to be so favoured."



"THEY STARED STRAIGHT INTO ETERNITY"

"So so. I must introduce myself."

"There is not likely," he said, sneeringly, "to be anything in common between Ted Lovell, the draper's son—I do not pretend to be a person of family—and your lordship."

"I am interested in people," I returned, observing him. "I have heard of the suicide. I am interested in that haunted front room."

I saw the watch-chain on his waistcoat lift high. Then he spread his hands with a deprecatory gesture.

"I regret that somebody has been playing on your lordship's—I will not say credulity."

"You have no message, then?"

He followed me across the room with a curious cat-like tread. The air about him bristled with violence.

"You are pleased to be interested in my affairs," he said, with a suspicion of menace.

"I am interested in the construction of a certain room in a house I saw you building. You remember I went over it once," I added, quickly. But I was not quick enough. His eyebrows lifted.

"I was not aware it had been so honoured." His manner changed. "As you are so kind," he said, smoothly, "I will take the liberty of asking you to talk with Lovell. Since Rudderford's case, he has spoken morbidly of suicide. It is idiocy in a man so well placed."

"I will advise him to sleep in the large front room," I said.

He turned as if I had struck him, and went back to his work.

* * *

Hopkins opened the door. Her lids dropped on a gleam of recognition. It was the first rule of my institution that wheresoever or whensoever I should appear I was not to be identified. A pretty, fragile little creature in a tea-gown tripped into the drawing-room.

"I am pleased to know you," I said, taking her hand. "I am Lord Syfret. You will perhaps have heard of me: Mr. Simpkins is my agent."

She blushed and fluttered, smiling up at me.

"Uncle was good to speak of us, and your lordship is kinder to come and see us," she said, prettily.

Lovell was a pale-faced, ill-grown Cockney, proud of his lately-acquired money, proud of all he had exchanged

it for, and genuinely proud of his little wife.

"She's a jewel I wouldn't change for the 'ighest lady in the land," he confided to me. His watery eyes were full of tears. The statement was not likely to be put to the test; but I believe he honestly meant it.

"If you can put me up for the night I shall be infinitely obliged," I said. They would be greatly honoured. I hinted to be allowed to occupy the front large room.

"Why, I'd just persuaded Milly we'd sleep there to-night," he blurted.

Milly broke in—

"I will have a fire put there for you, Lord Syfret," and tripped away.

We had finished dinner, and Milly had sung me her songs—sweet little ballads she sang in a sweet little unaffected way—when there came a knocking at the front door. After an interval Simpkins entered. His eyes were blood-shot, his air restless. As he came in he shot a look at Lovell. That look said plainly, "I got your wire." I received him coolly. I regarded his intrusion as an impertinence. With his entry a reserve fell upon us. Poor Mrs. Lovell lost all her confidence and smiling gaiety. She watched him with a fascinated terror. She stole nearer to me as if for protection. Presently she made her apologies. She was not well and might she be excused? She was faint and trembling. I gave her my arm to the door. She sent one long shuddering look back at him. Then she drew a little agitated hand across her brow.

"O, my lord," she moaned through her white lips, "I am so afraid of him."

I steadied her to a chair. Lovell came out. I went back to the drawing-room. Simpkins sat scowling there.

"Your lordship's and my visits were ill-timed," he said, with a coarse laugh. "This night, even, may make me a great uncle."

After a few moments, professing anxiety about his niece, he left. Out in the hall an altercation sounded. I could hear his rough voice raised. I could hear the sob and pleading of a woman's voice and Lovell's cockney drawl. Once she cried out: "O, Ned, I cannot, cannot sleep there."

I went out.

"Is Mrs. Lovell better?" I questioned. She came to me with pleading hands.

"O, Lord Syfret——" she began. Simpkins caught her by the arm.

"You are hysterical," he said, roughly. "You must not bother his lordship."

I took her hand. "Remember, my dear, that I am to have the haunted room."

"Do you say it is haunted?" she asked, with wild eyes.

"You frighten her," Simpkins interposed, adding ceremoniously, "I regret the room has not been prepared for you. It is Mr. and Mrs. Lovell's own room."

She turned on him helplessly. She caught her breath with a sob. Lovell put his arm about her and persuaded her upstairs. At the top of the staircase she turned and swept one last terrified look down at us. Then she was gone. That look has never left me. To my death I shall regret that I did not act upon it and save her. I turned on Simpkins, who also stood looking up. There was in his face a singular malignant exultation.

"Why the deuce did you interfere?"

He looked me insolently in the eyes.

"Your lordship does not act with his accustomed breeding when he forces himself on an employé's affairs, and even dictates the room his host shall put him in."

He followed me into the drawing-room. There was an aggressive triumph about him.

"I sleep in town," he said. "Good-night."

I bowed. At the door he turned back.

"My agreement with you ends next week," he intimated, airily.

* * *

In the middle of the night I was roused by a curious sound. It seemed to be a muffled rumbling close at hand. I threw on some clothes and slipped into the passage. In the dim light I could see a thin line of shadow sliding down the wall—almost as if the wall had been moving. From somewhere sounded a hollow ticking, like that of an immense clock. Strange how the night develops sound! I had not seen nor previously heard a clock.

I was returning to my room, all noise but the sonorous tick having ceased, when I thought I heard a cry—a faint cry—in the same little voice that had

sung me her ballads. It was followed by two deep groans. Heavens! what had happened? I stood listening, with strained ears. But no other sound came, nothing but that ghostly ticking. I groped my way along the passage, feeling for a door. I missed it, but coming to the centre, where I had seen it some hours earlier, I laid my ear against the wall. I was struck by its curious chillness. The wall was of iron! I did not stop to wonder, for now I could plainly detect a deep drawn breathing. It kept time intermittently with the clock. I knocked on the wall. It might be merely Lovell snoring. But I did not like the sound of it.

Suddenly I became aware of the same heavy odour I had before detected. It was no escape of gas. I remembered Hopkins' words about the bitter almonds. This was a smell of bitter almonds. Then I laughed at myself. I should be seeing Rudderford's ghost next! Yet so strongly were my senses worked upon that I grew presently faint with the overpowering odour. And it was unmistakably a smell of bitter almonds. Again I groped for the door handle. I drew my hands along and up and down the wall, going over the whole expanse between the rooms at either end. I could find neither handle nor panel nor jamb. The whole extent was one smooth, iron-cold surface. The clock clacked tick! tick! tick! with sonorous beat. By this the stentorous breathing had ceased. On the other side was silence.

Groping once more and finding no door, I became alarmed. I ran back to my room—my head throbbing till I reeled—and lighted a candle. I dipped my handkerchief into water and bound it loosely across my mouth and nostrils. Then I carried my candle into the passage. It was as I had suspected. There was no door. As on that morning, so now the space between the rooms at either end of the corridor was one plain surface. Trapping and testing brought out the chill feel and hollow note of metal. An iron plate had been dropped over the door—barring egress and ingress. The horrible clock ticked on. For what purpose? I was now convinced of some catastrophe. I knocked and called. I pounded with my fists upon the iron plate. It sounded thunderously, reproducing in exaggeration the noise that had



"FLUNG HIMSELF UPON THE PANELS"

awakened me. But no other sound answered. I rushed upstairs and stood in the upper passage calling for help. I beat one or two doors. Soon a man appeared—the single man-servant of the establishment. He thrust his head out sleepily.

"Come," I insisted, "something has happened."

As we descended the same low, rumbling sound was audible. In the flickering light the wall was crossed again by a rapid line of shadow—a line that now ascended. Then all was silent. Even the clock stopped. By this the almond smell was overpowering. I made the man protect his mouth and nostrils. The first thing my light flashed on was the door of Lovell's room, the door of which a minute earlier there had been no trace. Gracious, what devilry was this? And what the calamity. I knocked loudly on the panels. An ominous stillness reigned. I knocked again. Then I turned the handle and went in.

They were dead. They lay quiet as in sleep, only a curious blueness of skin and glassiness of the widely-staring eyeballs showed the sleep final. Her hand was in his; her head lay on his shoulder. So they stared straight into eternity, a smile on their faces.

But this was not all. The pitifulness of it—the pitifulness! For at her side, curled up as if in slumber, lay a newborn babe—a tiny premature thing that nestled a darkly-curling head against her arm.

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Before it was day I had interviewed the magistrate and police. They pooh-poohed my version of the case, rejecting it as melo-drama; such things were not out of romances. The case was manifestly one of concerted suicide. The sliding-wall excited smiles. In the middle of the night, they said, one can be pardoned some foggiess of sense. They did not consider there was so far a tittle of evidence on which to arrest Simpkins.

I sent for a London detective. I set an expert to explore the wall. It were impossible, he said, to explain a singular construction without some preliminary and considerable damage, which pending the inquest was not advisable. There were grooves in the door-jambs of the

small rooms off the passage—there was space to contain such a sliding-wall as I had indicated.

That night I secreted in the house my detective, two police-officers and a friend. I knew Simpkins would come, and he came, as I likewise expected, with materials for a conflagration. Hopkins admitted him. He would remain the night, he said. He professed an overwhelming grief. He had already supped. He would go straight to that room where the dead lay. Through a peep-hole punctured in the wall we watched him from one of the adjoining rooms. No sooner was the door shut than he dragged chairs, cushions, towel-rack, all else combustible toward the door. He even tore the curtains from the bed. Then he saturated the whole with oil he had with him. He had lighted a fuse and was making for the door when suddenly he stopped.

Tick! tick! began the clock. Tick! tick! It startled us with its suddenness and nearness. In a panic he flung his fuse. It fell short and lay smouldering on the floor. But he heeded nothing. He was beating frenziedly upon the door. However, we had seen into that. Tick! tick! went the clock. He thundered with his fists and feet and shouted desperately.

A rumbling began. He flung himself upon the panels. But they held out bravely. Tick! tick! went the clock; rumble, rumble, rolled the descending wall. He sprang to the windows; but we had seen to those. Suddenly I realised what was about to happen. The devilry planned by himself was on his track, hastened, it might be, by the explorations of my expert.

"Quick, quick!" I urged. "Unlock the door; we must not take the law into our hands."

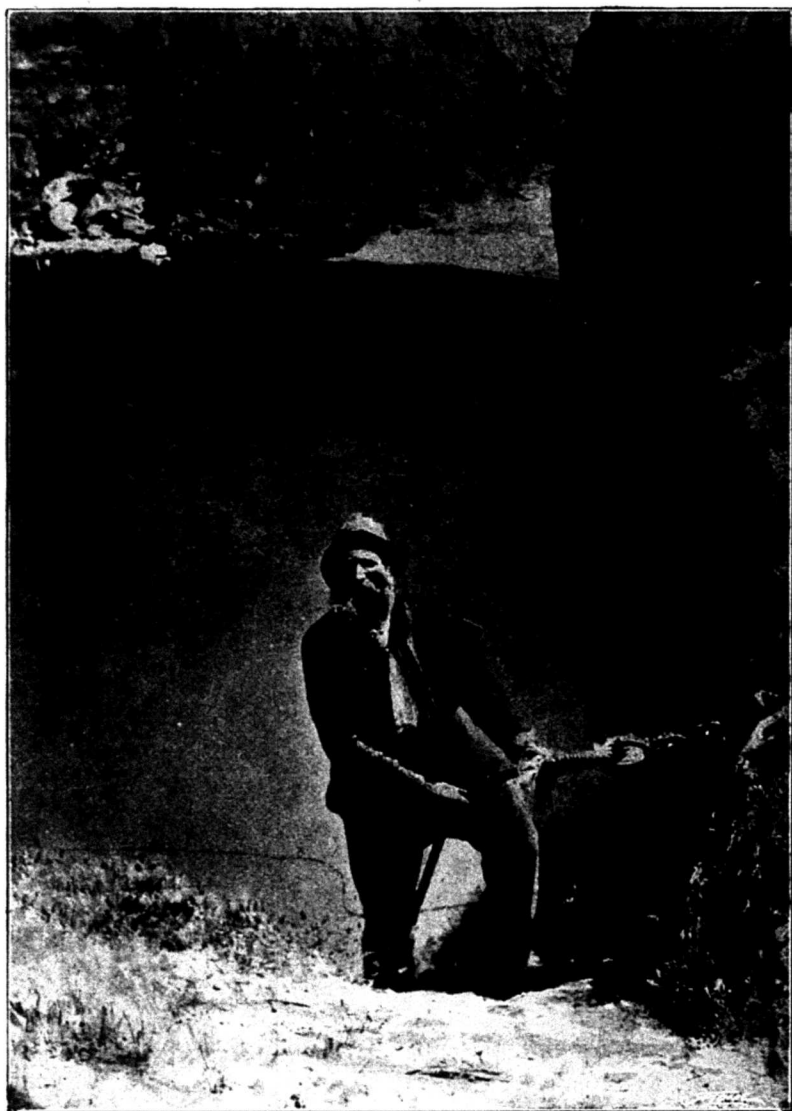
But we were too late. Outside, in the corridor, the sliding wall came down—the door was sealed. The rumble ceased; but the clock ticked on, counting his moments. The almond smell rose strong.

"Where do the fumes come from?" I questioned.

The detective, with an impassive face, stepped aside from a peep-hole. I looked long enough to see that a soft-spraying like tiny rain was falling in the room. Already he lay on the floor with gasping breath and distended eyes. I

left the peep-hole to more interested watchers. Tick! tick! went the clock, counting his moments. Tick! tick! tick! "He's dead," they said. Tick! tick! went the clock. We passed into the corridor. The wall slid presently up with its curious rumble. Then the clock stopped. We opened the door and went in. He was dead, truly. And

death in his guise was not dignified. He had been caught in the trap of his own ingenuity—for the mechanism showed a devilish ingenuity. The clockwork regulating it—clockwork set by his own hand—had with a fine unerring justice timed away his life. I will wager clockwork has rarely done the world greater service.



THE FISHERMAN'S LANDING
From a photograph by the Rev. A. H. Blake

At an Elephant Round-Up.

BY G. W. WARD.



HERE is only one place in the whole wide world where it is possible to breakfast comfortably in a well-appointed hotel, and yet after a few hours' travel by rail or river, view a free circus comprising some three hundred real ramping, raging, wild elephants. Even in the place I mention the spectacle is to be seen but once a year for a week in the spring; when, the elephantine fancy "lightly turning," &c., the increased sociability of the herds leads them to their own undoing at the hands of their fellow-elephants. It is a sight not likely to be seen by another generation if there is any further dividing up of Further India by England and France, for the *locale* is that distressful country which is rapidly becoming a mere geographical expression—Siam. Ten years ago the Lord of the White Elephant really did lord it: for hundreds of miles in every direction around his palace on the banks of the Menam he owned every "ingy-rubber bull with a tail at both ends," wild or tame, and the penalties for meddling with them were severe. Now the area of his Majesty's preserves is much diminished. Siam to-day is nothing but the Menam region, which an active elephant can walk across between two meals.

Nevertheless there is every likelihood of the Siamese authorities continuing to organise the Mammoth Spring Circus for some years to come, and stay-at-home people may be interested in learning what it looked like in its palmier days. Eighty odd miles north of Bangkok is a large area intersected by innumerable creeks, and covered with crumbling brickwork and wrecked structures of heavy teak, just as it was left when the Burmese invaders had gone over it with their search-warrant, nearly a century and a-half ago. The name of the place

is Ayuthia, Siam's capital for half a thousand years, and now nothing but a big village amid the ruins of whose palaces and temples

*"The shelter-seeking peasant builds his shed,
And, wond'ring man could want t' e
larger pile,
Exults, and owns his cottage with a
smile."*

There is more piracy, and dacoity, and cattle-rearing round the played-out metropolis than in all Lower Burmah under our administration.

But to return to our elephants. Over the immense alluvial plains surrounding Ayuthia roam uncounted elephants and innumerable smaller game — buffalo, tiger, deer and the rest. Live stock of that sort swarms to a degree undreamt of by the average shikari in other countries; yet nobody ever goes shooting. So the elephant and his congeners have a good time, devastating paddy-fields and village plantations. Especially is this true of the elephant, because the native is precluded by law from potting him, and it is not easy to poach an elephant. The pirates and dacoits and buffalo-lifters never trouble them, and there are plenty of keepers to see that they are not shot or allowed to tumble into pitfalls. Gangs of the royal slaves are for ever on their track, and marking their increase, so far as this can be done without alarming them. Day and night they are on watch, be the season wet or dry. Towards the end of January, however, their real work begins, or it may be a good deal earlier, according to the distance the herd is from Ayuthia.

Getting to the off-side, the men have to drive their charges towards a common centre—no easy thing with a suspicious tusker weighing about four thousand pounds to conciliate, and eight or nine uneasy mothers, each with some precious offspring, in various stages of growth, at foot. These lady elephants usually insist